

Misophonia

What is Misophonia?

Misophonia (from the Greek words *misos* meaning ‘hate’ and *phónè* meaning ‘voice’) is a condition in which a person experiences a strong, negative emotional response to specific trigger sounds. Common triggers include chewing, sniffing, breathing, pen tapping, typing, snoring, or scratching. The response may be emotional—such as feelings of rage, annoyance, or anxiety—and can often be accompanied by physical reactions such as tensing muscles, jaw clenching, or becoming verbally or physically aggressive toward the person or object producing the sound. These reactions may also be situational; for example, the sound of a child sniffing might trigger a response, whereas the same sound from a stranger might not.

Misophonia is not life-threatening; however, it can significantly impact a person’s social and mental well-being. It can develop at any age in both men and women, with symptoms typically appearing in late childhood or early adolescence. Misophonia is not related to hearing loss—individuals with this condition often have excellent hearing!

What Causes Misophonia?

Misophonia is not caused by your ears or hearing. In fact, the condition is part mental and part physical and said to be related to how sounds affect your brain triggering a completely involuntary, automatic physical or emotional response. The response is believed to involve the Autonomic Nervous System (“flight-or-flight” response) and the Limbic System (system associated with emotion).

Misophonia is sometimes mistaken for anxiety, bipolar disorder, or obsessive-compulsive disorder, as there are no established diagnostic criteria, and the condition is not recognized as an official diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*.

Treatment

Treatment for misophonia focuses on retraining the brain to reduce or eliminate reactions to trigger sounds. Three main treatment approaches are commonly used: **Sound Therapy with Controlled Exposure**, **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**, and **Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)**.

Sound Therapy + Controlled Exposure

- This method uses sound masking to reduce the impact of trigger sounds, while gradually and safely reintroducing those sounds. Over time, this process can lessen the strength and severity of negative reactions.
- Headphones are usually best, but speakers or other sound generators (e.g., phones, sound machines) may also be effective.
- Choose sounds that trigger positive emotions (e.g., favorite music, podcasts, or nature sounds like waves or running water).
- Avoid environments where your reactions are strongest (e.g., cafeterias if chewing is a trigger).
- Gradually expose yourself to trigger environments while practicing relaxation techniques. Controlled exposure can reduce, and in some cases eliminate, physical and emotional responses.

Example: In a high-trigger environment, listen to music through headphones to block out the sound. Briefly lower the volume so the trigger becomes faintly audible, then use relaxation techniques to stay calm. Over time, gradually increase your exposure by lowering the masking volume further. With practice, you may be able to tolerate the trigger without masking.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

- CBT is a form of therapy provided by a trained therapist or psychiatrist that focuses on identifying unhealthy patterns in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.
- The goal is to replace unhelpful patterns with healthier, more positive ways of thinking.
- As individuals gain insight into their reactions to trigger sounds, they also learn coping strategies to better manage those reactions.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

- Stress often causes muscle tension, even when you may not notice it.
- PMR is a technique that involves tightening and then relaxing muscles, one group at a time, in a specific sequence.
- The goal is to become more aware of tension in your body and learn how to release it.
- To practice: tighten a muscle group for a few seconds, then slowly relax it.
- PMR has also been shown to help with conditions such as high blood pressure, migraines, and sleep problems.

Practicing sound masking, muscle relaxation or talking to a professional will have you in control of your trigger sounds in no time!



"Sound will be the medicine of the future."
— Edgar Cayce